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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of parents and the nuclear family in optimal development of gifted preschool children. The family helps the child accomplish basic developmental tasks by adapting to the child's critical needs and interests in appropriate ways. While stimulating academic skills is important, affective education to aid the acquisition of confidence and self-worth is the family's major role. The child's conflicts in the areas of trust or mistrust and autonomy or shame/doubt must be resolved. Stimulation of language development has direct effects on development of thought processes. Self-confidence is built through parental warmth, respectful treatment, and clearly defined limits. Parents can demonstrate their acceptance and support through interest in the child, helping him or her to work through negative feelings, and participating in joint activities. (DB)

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THE EDUCATION OF THE GIFTED PRE-SCHOOL CHILD IN THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The nuclear family remains without any doubt the single most important factor in the rearing of pre-school children. In a rapidly and consistently changing world, with its ever increasing and demanding challenges and the problems it brings in its wake, the successful rearing of the gifted pre-school child becomes more compellingly important.

Parental encouragement and support are emphasized as essential to development of the mind in pre-school years, as well as to the social and emotional facets. Parents have a specific educational task in securing optimal development of the gifted child's abilities. Only then will he become a completely actualized individual with a strongly developed self-concept.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

Powerful forces and sudden changes in contemporary society present unique problems, creates new challenges and makes increasing demands on human thought and behaviour. If we are to cope with the future, the full potential of our gifted population becomes a matter of urgency. We need leaders with the gift and "ability to look ahead, to make predictions regarding trends and long-rage effects, to work together to consider alternatives, and to participate ethically, responsibly, and synergistically in the creative solving of problems and the meeting of challenges increasingly interdependent in nature" (Bleedorn, 1979).

Most of these men and women will naturally come from nuclear families where parents will participate in educating the gifted architects of the future, the leaders who will help to solve problems and meet challenges so that their fellow men may (can) live in peace and prosperity. The "how" and "will" to deal with the future is to a great extent dependent on the rearing by parents, especially during the pre-school years, of the gifted and talented child.

Gifted children "are a natural resource for every nation and country which, if not cultivated early, may lie fallow and unproductive" (Horne & Dupuy, 1981). Parents therefore have a responsibility beyond the normal to educate their gifted children, because all children, including the gifted, cannot ordinarily excel without assistance or education.

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Developmental tasks originated primarily from (i) physical maturation, and (ii) cultural pressures. The aspirations and values of the individual are

secondary origins, and a consequence of the two mentioned above.

Cultural pressures may be recognized in terms of rewards and punishments the individual receives for his behaviour. Peers, associates, teachers and significant others, but primarily the parents, expect and educate the person to conform to prescribed ways of behaviour in a given culture. Developmental tasks differ from culture to culture, depending on definitions and expectations.

Encouragement and support by parents are essential in accomplishing developmental tasks. Basically, a developmental task is a thrust from within the individual to develop in a certain way in order to attain a desired goal. The successful achievement of a developmental task leads to satisfaction, approval of and success in future tasks. Although the will to change comes from within, demands and expectations are evoked by parents who are directed by what is expected of an individual at a certain developmental age in a specific culture. The developmental task is a growth responsibility with at least four interrelated operations.

(1) "perceiving new possibilities for his behaviour in what is expected of him or in what he sees others, more mature than he, accomplishing,
(2) forming new conceptions of himself (identity formation),
(3) coping effectively with conflicting demands upon him and
(4) wanting to achieve the next step in his development enough to work toward it" (motivation) (Duvall, 1977).

These growth responsibilities result from the combined impact of biological maturation, environmental forces and the gifted child's own personal drives, ambitions and values.

The nuclear family has basic tasks to perform which are essential for survival and continuity. These include: Insuring members' socialization through internalization of increasingly mature roles, establishing ways of interacting, communicating, expressing affection, aggression, etc. within the limits set by society, maintaining morale and motivation, rewarding achievement, setting goals and developing family loyalties and values.

During the gifted child's pre-school years the stage-critical family developmental task is to adapt to the child's critical needs and interests in stimulating and growth-promoting ways.

The parents', and therefore the family's educational goals, should have a positive effect on the lives of their gifted children and must support and motivate them in their psychosocial development.

NEEDS OF THE GIFTED PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Gifted pre-school children can be expected to be different from their peers, in that their need for challenge and intellectual excitement, for creative exploration and production are so much greater.
This is, however, not necessarily the case, because the gifted child's "potential must be developed into performance". Parental education plays an important and decisive roll in the actualization of the gifted child's potential during the pre-school years.

One of the commonly accepted goals of education is to "develop the mind". The mind is the totality of mental processes such as thinking, feeling, willing, perceiving, and intuiting.
Thinking processes involve the integration and understanding of specific

perceptual relations and the ability to manipulate and judge these abstractions for speculation and eventual problem solving.

Academic as well as non-academic subjects require certain psychological 'sets' and attitudes that center energy and attention. The set is in reality a personal willingness to invest one's energy in learning to follow particular thinking processes to understand a subject or skill. As a result of such personal involvement, the learner gradually begins to think appropriately and increases his achievement. Mental growth of the gifted child during pre-school years is certainly affected by the nature of the child's experiences within the nuclear family.

Although development of the mind of the gifted child during pre-school years is of great importance, gifted children are not exempt from fear of success, fear of failure and fear associated with poor self-concept development.

The need for affective education of the gifted pre-schooler remains one of the most basic development tasks of the nuclear family.

In order to acquire knowledge, learn basic skills, participate fully and actively in the institutions of society, the gifted child must develop confidence and a feeling of selfworth. For parents to create an atmosphere where the gifted pre-schooler can attain pride in himself and in his work, the importance of affective education in the nuclear family situation must be explored more closely.

THE NEED FOR AFFECTIVE EDUCATION

Parents often accept too easily that healthy development of the child is a

result of physical growth and that the development of the gifted pre-school child results magically because the child is genetically endowed with superior cognitive potential.

This is however a rather unfortunate assumption. Assumptions about the nature of the child are of primary importance in pre-school education. Obviously the way parents understand the development of a child and his uniqueness as a person will eventually determine the choice of educational experiences.

Parents who are mostly concerned about the cognitive or academic achievement of their children, will put a high premium on the cognitive aspects, and parents who believe in the total development of the child will obviously focus on the various and different needs, and the emotional, social, creative, physical, moral and cognitive selves will be explored and educated.

Not all gifted pre-school children will be born motivated to use their intellectual potential optimally to master the environment.

The gifted pre-school child's experiencing and exploring of real-life situations can be seen as a direct consequence of parent-child interaction in a nuclear family which is essentially characterized by a positive and affective educational climate.

For the gifted pre-school child to grow up into a unique and healthy individual decisions, creativity and self-actualization are indeed important factors to be considered. Affectiveness remains a vital ingredient in the optimal development of the gifted child's potentialities and capabilities. Parents have an all-important and highly sensitive task in the affective

education of the gifted pre-school child. For any gifted child to enhance his basic self and cognitive potential to the best of his ability, life must be meaningful and challenging. According to Rogers (1959) the self is the "organized gestalt ... of the 'I' or 'me'." One's self-concept is learned socially, as are the needs for positive regard and positive self-regard. If the gifted pre-school child is totally accepted by his parents (unconditional positive regard), positive self-regard emerges. If the behaviour of the gifted child, rather than his total person are evaluated and some actions are judged positively and others negatively (conditional positive regard) then conditions of worth develop. The gifted child experiences "do" or "do not" as necessary in order to feel appreciated and accepted. Cognitive achievement can become an important asset in the life of the gifted child in creating conditions of worth. This condition of worth, in turn may lead to defensive functioning of the closing off of other and more specific social experiences. This generates discrepancies between the objective and the subjective world, producing anxiety and threat to the gifted child. Under these circumstances, incongruency develops as a result of the social practice that produces conditions of worth and prevents self-actualization of the unique gifted person.

Self-actualization of the gifted pre-school child can be either facilitated or impeded by parents. A child's beliefs about himself and his attitudes are positively related. If he feels good about himself, he also feels positively about others and seek interaction with them.

There are a multiplicity of need-systems. According to the psychosocial development theory of Erikson children, and therefore also gifted children, go through specific stages of life where conflict between negatives and positives must be resolved. Although attainment of positive resolvement

does not imply permanency, the initial psychosocial developmental stages are of crucial importance in the development of the gifted child's future as a potential leader.

During infancy he learns to trust or mistrust in a situation where the parent-child interaction is the cornerstone of healthy personality development. In the nuclear family situation the child learns a basic sense of trust or mistrust that may last throughout his entire life.

During early childhood the gifted child acquires a sense of autonomy or shame and doubt. The development of the will is one of the important facets in the educational task-repertoire of the parent. The will to make a success, to achieve, to create, and to be a self-actualized person has to be nurtured in the most positive of educational atmospheres by parents who love their child, not for his giftedness, but because he is their child to whom they have a primary responsibility as caring parents. During play-age the gifted child's creative imagination is greatly expanded because of his high intellectual, communication abilities and his mobility. Curiosity leads to activity and with creative fantasies he has to be educated to use his initiative and develop a sense of trust in his potential and feelings as a person. The establishment of conscience is a vital factor during this pre-school period. If the tendency to feel guilty is "transferred" by the parents, the child experiences himself as essentially bad which causes feelings of guilt and anxiety.

LANGUAGE AS MEDIUM IN EDUCATING THE GIFTED CHILD

Human mental activity takes place in situations of actual communication with the environment, and the child acquires the experience of generations

through his interaction.

The mother's first words have an indiscernible but decisively important in-influence on the formation of mental processes. Intercommunication with adults is of decisive significance, because language acquisition involves the organization of the child's basic mental processes. Language is basic to mental activity,reflects reality, creates new forms of attention, of memory and imagination, of thought and action.

Not only the experience of generations and the historical content is transferred through parent-child interaction but a complex system of connections in the gifted child's cortex analyses and synthesizes the language information about himself as a person, which he perceives from what his parents communicate to him verbally.
On the basis of his research findings Vigotsky in Luria (1971) came to the fundamental conclusion that mental development has its origin in the verbal communication between child and adult. During the gifted child's pre-school years, parents obviously have the opportunity to help the child by means of verbal processes to formulate aims and the necessary means for their achievement.

Parents have to realize that the sources of creative mental processes do not lie in the intelligence quotient but are to be found in complex forms of social life and in the child's communication with people around him. The child acquires a system of verbal instructions and gradually utilizes it for the regulation of his own behaviour.

Gifted children may ask many questions of 'how' and 'why' at an early age. By asking questions and obtaining answers he acquires a vocabulary, but in

the process of obtaining answers he is building up an understanding of the world and its people around him.

Exposure to adult language during the pre-school years not only stimulates intellectual development, it also serves as an important reinforcer of self-concept, which in turn forms the basis for optimal implementation of intellectual power.

SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT OF THE GIFTED PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Self-concept is an important non-intellectual factor to be considered in the education of the gifted pre-school child.

Self-concept is a compound of experiences that Allport in Newman & Newman (1981) defines as "the self-as-known - that which is experienced as warm and central, as of importance". The self-concept integrates diverse life situations and gives momentum and direction to future growth. An evolving set of thoughts and feelings about the self gradually establishes and provides an organized structure against which the person evaluates stability and change. It is primarily the result of interaction with the social and physical environment.

An important assumption of the self is that the maintenance and enhancement of the perceived self is the motive behind all behaviour (Purkey, 1970). The self is a basic frame of reference, the core of the organized perceptual field. Everything is therefore conceived from a personal self-reference vantage point. The gifted child evaluates the world and its meaning in terms of how he sees himself. New concepts of the self are accepted and assimilated more easily if it is consistent and relevant to the existing self.

It is therefore of vital importance to the gifted child that his core self-concept, which develops mainly during the early pre-school years, must be sound and positive.

Self-concept is defined by Marx & Winre (1978) as a person's "expectations of success in solving problems and completing tasks". Interviews and assesments of the needs of gifted children indicate that high-achieving gifted pupils generally have positive academic self-concepts.

Perceptions of personal efficacy and academic achievement have a strong positive relationship with internal perceptions of control. Research studies have shown a relatively strong positive correlation between academic self-concept and academic performance in the formal school situation. If the gifted child views himself as capable he will approach the academic challenge with confidence and expect to succeed. If the behavioural norms and cognitive skills a child has learned in the nuclear family culture differ markedly from those the school demands, the child is likely to experience failure beyond his control which he will consequently attribute to inability and helplessness.

A baby responds to others by smiling, vocalizing and moving his arms and legs. The child learns many things about himself, including his value and worth as a person. The main force which shapes the self is the parents and the impact of parental education on the self-concept during the early years of the gifted child can hardly be emphasized sufficiently.

Educational aims for the young gifted child are the development of feelings of adequacy, capability, worthiness, being wanted, loved, able, competent and respected. Research findings reported by Coopersmith (1967) list three

conditions which causes the individual to value himself as a person of worth. All three are to be found in the natural pre-school environment of the nuclear family. The conditions are:

(1) parental warmth, where the child senses the love and concern of his family and feels that his parents see him as a person of worth.
(2) respectful treatment, where the child's views are considered and he has a rightful and democratic position in the family, and
(3) clearly defined limits, whereby the child comes to realize through his parents' relatively high demands and expectations of success, that they care about what happens to him.

These three conditions constitute a general parental attitude of positive regard and affection.

Concern about the development of a positive self-concept during pre-school years is justified on the grounds that

(1) the process of gathering data and forming evaluations of the self takes place during the first eight years of life and
(2) the self-concept remains relatively constant once acquired (Coopersmith. 1967) and
(3) to build a positive self-concept is much easier than rebuilding or changing a negative self-concept later in childhood or adolescence.

A very important factor in the life of the gifted pre-school child is his interpretation of how his parents view him. The attitudes parents express toward their child are as important as the child's perception of these attitudes. The gifted child, with his higher cognitive abilities, will be most sensitive to his parents' expressed feelings, ideas and attitudes

towards him.

A person's self-concept is many facets: One of these facets is self-esteem, which is part of the total self-concept and of special significance to all parents. Coopersmith (1967) refers to self-esteem as "the evaluation which an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, sucessful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a 'personal' judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself.

These attitudes of the gifted pre-school child are a result of what people in their immediate social environment think of them. The child reflects the attitudes of other important people. A child who judges the self to be likeable, valued and competent develops high self-esteem because he exists in a social world where the nuclear family members reflect certain attitudes.

The self-esteem has several dimensions and each dimension adds content, depth and energy to the self-concept. The two selfesteem dimensions which should be emphasized in parenting the pre-school gifted child, are competence and worth.

Competence refers to feelings of effectiveness and personal influence. White (1968) argues that in addition to satisfying physiological needs, individuals also have an inherent drive for mastery and competence. This inherent quality causes the infant to practice sitting up.

The child who feels competent is, at least to a degree, in control of his

own destiny, and he feels good about himself. The gifted child who sees himself as competent expects that he will, under most conditions, be able to cope with whatever demands he encounters, and 'derives joy from the encounter'. The child must believe that he can cause things to happen. Competency is not something parents bestow on children by praising them or making them feel important. Merited praise is valuable in building competence since the young child needs the positive feelings of his parents. Overtime parents must however provide the gifted pre-school child with sources of competence from within himself.

The parents must firstly provide an educational climate in which the child can experience competence. The gifted child must have sufficient time and opportunities for practice and the level of challenge must be sufficiently difficult to stimulate interest. Meaningful work and interaction will enhance feelings of mastery and satisfaction. The accomplishment of successful experiences makes him feel capable and adequate, and a competent person.

Secondly, parents must encourage feelings of competency by teaching the child to do things for himself. To increase his outonomy and gain a positive feeling of self. Stimulating independence in the gifted child is not easy, because the parent has to judge when to lend a loving hand and when to wait quietly for the child to explore on his own, since optimal learning is promoted through actual experience and participation.

Worth refers to the pre-school child's feelings of personal virtue and whether he values and likes the self. Behaviour of parents which causes the gifted pre-school child to think highly of himself, adequate, capable, wanted, loved and able is esteem building. When respect and warmth are present, the child's questions answered, offers of help are accepted, discipline is based

on success and affection, the child is included in his parents' emotional life and his potential as a unique person is valued, the child's worth is nurtured.

Parental acceptance and support constitutes the core of the parent-child relationship. Children educated in family atmospheres characterized by parental support develop positive self-esteems. They think of themselves as competent and worthy, because their worth is reflected by their parents. The child internalizes the parents' attitude that he is important and valuable to them.

Parents of a gifted pre-school child demonstrate acceptance and support through behaviour and communication. Coopersmith (1967) singles out three major means of expressing genuine support:

Firstly parents show an interest in the "child" as a person and in his activities. The parent makes it clear that he is really interested in him. As a result the child becomes effective and competent in interpersonal skills, and will therefor be able and eager to initiate and complete more complex projects. When he enters formal school he will continue to explore new situations open-mindedly, trusting his own judgement and living each moment fully.

Secondly parents of the gifted pre-school child acknowlege and help him work through anger, hurt, or feelings of fear. They make themselves available by listening actively, and by means of verbal and non-verbal communication. Interaction of this quality is perceived by the child as a genuine attempt on the parents' part, not only to lend support in times of trouble, but also an acknowledgment and interest in his joys, and a general regard

for his feelings.

Thirdly parents express their acceptance and support by participating willingly in joint activities.

Parents play a significant role in their children's reading development Chambers (1977) summarized the importance of parental involvement at preschool level rather effectively when he wrote "children become readers with the greatest ease and lasting effect when they are prepared for it, preferably from birth, by a daily experience of literature read aloud to them and an abundance of books shown to them". The quantity of time devoted is not as important as the quality of the interaction. If the parent accepts the opportunity for interaction willingly and enthusiastically he will in fact communicate acceptance and worth which in turn will be internalized as feelings of acceptance.

Positive, prescriptive and inductive discipline is an extremely powerful tool in guiding the gifted child towards self-discipline and increased co-operative, helpful behaviour. Induction has a significant and positive influence on the child's feeling of self-worth. It creates an opportunity for parents to communicate their attitude regarding the child's competence and worth.

A positive self-esteem is established in an educational climate where parents, through father-mother and parent-child interaction, consciously communicate to the gifted child that he is accepted as an individual who has the ability to become a competent, worthy human being.

Parents who find themselves in a position of having to educate a gifted child need not necessarily be gifted themselves, but they must of necessity be congruent, genuine and integrated, and demonstrate empathy and respect for the experiences of the gifted child.

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